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AUTHOR Hillocks, George, Jr.
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ABSTRACT

Experience in teaching composition at every level, from seventh grade to advanced writing courses intended for college sophomores, reveals one common problem--lack of specificity. Hillocks discusses this problem and suggests that it can be surmounted by involving students in the process of observing, encouraging them to draw inferences from their observations, and helping them to develop the sense of audience and critical awareness that comes with having students read, listen to, and comment on each other's writing. Fifteen activities designed to increase the students' power as observers and recorders of sensory experience are described. (JM)

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THEORY INTO PRACTICE

Observing and Writing

George Hillocks, Jr.
University of Chicago

ED102574

There was a child went forth every day
And the first object he look'd upon, that object he became
And that object became part of him for the day or a certain part of the day
Or for many years or stretching cycles of years.

Walt Whitman

ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading and Communication Skills
National Council of Teachers of English
1111 Kenyon Road, Urbana, Illinois 61801

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Foreword

THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC) is a national information system developed by the U.S. Office of Education and now sponsored by the National Institute of Education. It provides ready access to descriptions of exemplary programs, research and development efforts, and related information useful in developing more effective educational programs.

Through its network of specialized centers or clearinghouses, each of which is responsible for a particular educational area, ERIC acquires, evaluates, abstracts, indexes, and lists current significant information in its reference publications.

The ERIC system has already made available—through the ERIC Document Reproduction Service—much informative data, including all federally funded research reports since 1956. However, if the findings of specific educational research are to be intelligible to teachers and applicable to teaching, considerable bodies of data must be reevaluated, focused, translated, and molded into an essentially different context. Rather than resting at the point of making research reports readily accessible, NIE has directed the separate ERIC Clearinghouses to commission from recognized authorities information analysis papers in specific areas.

In addition, as with all federal educational information efforts, ERIC has as one of its primary goals bridging the gap between educational theory and actual classroom practices. One method of achieving that goal is the development by the ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading and Communication Skills (ERIC/RCS) of a series of sharply focused booklets based on concrete educational needs. Each booklet provides teachers with the best educational theory and/or research on a limited topic. It also presents descriptions of classroom activities which are related to the described theory and assists the teacher in putting this theory into practice.

This idea is not unique. Nor is the series title: *Theory Into Practice* (TIP). Several educational journals and many commercial textbooks provide teachers with similar aids. The ERIC/RCS booklets are unusual in their sharp focus on an educational need and their blend of sound academic theory with tested classroom practices. And they

have been developed because of the increasing requests from teachers to provide this kind of service.

Topics for these booklets are recommended by the ERIC/RCS National Advisory Committee. Suggestions for topics to be considered by the Committee should be directed to the Clearinghouse.

Bernard O'Donnell
DIRECTOR, ERIC/RCS

Theory

NEARLY ALL WRITING is directly dependent upon the writer's observation of phenomena and the relationships among those phenomena. The writing of scientists and social scientists is based on the careful analysis of specific data which are directly or indirectly observable. The insights of belletristic writers grow out of their personal observations. Unfortunately, when generalizations come to a writer second hand rather than through personal observation, his writing about them is likely to be trite, uninteresting, or both. Part of the impact of belletristic writing derives from the careful selection and representation of details which imply or support the generalizations of the writer. For example, *Huckleberry Finn* conveys generalizations about life along the Mississippi River prior to the Civil War, generalizations which to some extent must have been based on Mark Twain's observations of real life. Those generalizations have their impact on the reader because of the details in which they are couched.

Experience in teaching composition at every level from seventh grade to advanced writing courses intended for college sophomores reveals one common problem: lack of specificity. The occasional striking detail is a welcome oasis in a dry desert of generalization. The aridity of student writing probably results from a combination of causes. John Dixon suggests that teachers have not given students sufficient opportunity to explore and "talk about" meaningful experiences in the classroom.[1] Ken Macrorie argues that the empty, bloated language in student writing, which he has dubbed "Engfish," is the result of a system which demands that students adhere to traditional standards, write on preconceived topics, and give teachers what they want.[2] Perhaps "the system" (a generalized pejorative which itself belongs with the vocabulary of "Engfish") or the teachers in it are largely responsible.

Certainly, other hypotheses about the existence of dull student writing warrant consideration. Psychological studies of perception indicate that when observers are given a name for a drawing they look at, they use the name to categorize and recall what was observed, even though the name given was not accurate. Observers given a drawing which looks like curtains in a window along with the name "diamond" tend later to reproduce a diamond shape in a box rather than the actual

drawing observed. The name serves to categorize phenomena and suppress details which individualize it. When an object is readily named, further observation appears to be suspended.' Many aspects of our culture, especially the popular media, encourage superficial observation and generalization, for example, "Things go better with Coke." Most of us are content with a glance at the world around us, a glance which permits abstract categorizations, often at the expense of life-giving details. Finally, inexperienced writers often believe that generalizations will convey the full impact of an experience to the reader. For most of us, a few words can call to mind highly complex experiences of our own. The problem for a writer is to supply those details which are most likely to evoke a realization of that experience in the reader.

One way to surmount such problems includes involving students in the processes of observing, drawing inferences from their observations, rendering observations into words, and developing the sense of audience and critical awareness that comes with having students read, listen to, and comment on each other's writing.

Getting students to use specific detail effectively is no easy task. Exhortation is no use at all. But activities such as those suggested in part two have considerable effect. For example, in one period of less than six weeks the writing of David and Greg, two seventh-grade boys, changed considerably. The students in their class claimed that they most liked to write about people, places, and things or their own personal experiences. Accordingly, before and after our six weeks of work on observing and writing, the students wrote about a place, a thing, a person, or a personal experience of their own choice specifically enough to convey a strong impression of the subject to their classmates, an assignment which amounts to free writing. Both David and Greg chose to write about places for both assignments. Their first and second compositions follow. All have been corrected for mechanics.

David, Composition 1

The Place

This place is in Colorado. It is set at the bottom of a cliff next to a river. As far as I know, I am the only person who knows where it is. Anyway, it has a good view of some cabins. It also has lots of big boulders all around the place which I like to try to push over the cliff and into the river. I like to have animals around and climb trees.

David, Composition 2

The Transparent Elevator

As you walk into this elevator your feet seem to sink into the carpeted floor and a slight crunch lingers in your mind for a moment. As the doors

close behind me I then have to choose what floor I want to get off at. As I touch my finger to the button, a ring of light appears around the number I had touched. Then with a sudden jolt the elevator starts to move up. About four floors after mine the elevator jolts to a stop, and the doors roll open as if on castors, and an old man walks in with a pipe in his mouth. The doors close behind him. He pushes the button for the top floor. I had done the same. As the slow elevator surges its way on, it fills with smoke. The little exhaust fan at the top of the elevator seems to choke on the smoke. I move to the glass side of the elevator and try to escape the smoke. As I look down from the elevator I can see people walking around and talking with each other. Then a sharp sounding bell rings and the doors open. The smoke that the fan did not get rushes out, as if it wanted air too. I walk out after the man, and then some other people walk in for the long trip down.

Greg, Composition 1

The Place

There's not many interesting places I know, but since I have to write about one I'll write about my basement and the Ford Motor plant.

My Basement

My basement is so interesting because it is quiet. It has a secret passage, a broken door, and a lady hung herself down there, and it is haunted. And when I say quiet, I don't mean like any normal library. I mean blank!

Ford Motor Plant

All I can say for this place is that it is well organized, noisy, big, and cheap. The cars there are made so cheap off the assembly line it is almost a shame. Almost but not yet at least.

Greg, Composition 2

Mom's Window

I come in, sit down in my step-father's office, and try to think of something to write before it's too late to write anything at all. It's seven o-clock and I have to go to bed at ten. I want to watch T.V., but Mom says no. I gaze out of the window only to see bare trees, a gray sky, and a few street lights which remind me of diamonds on a black velvet dress.

Since there's nothing to write about in particular, I'll write about the office. I then throw a few spins in the revolving chair. I stop spinning, and I suddenly notice the faintest musical sound I've ever heard. It turns out to be music from a radio. After instinctively turning the knob, the volume increases and the sound blocks out the squawking T.V. I now start writing faster, the faster the song, the faster my pen slides over the paper. Each beat in the song seems to make each line of script act as an encephalograph. The song dies down and my human encephalograph dies also, but it still has a little life left in it yet. Boom, boom, boom, plays the song and the jazz just boils the ink in my pen. There's a black-faced clock on the wood grain desk that I'm using, and the clock shows not only 9 o-clock but also my reflection.

Neither boy has produced a masterpiece in his second composition. Neither has expressed an intense personal experience or revealed his private hates or fears. Neither has made the private revelations that some composition teachers seem to think are the hallmarks of "good" writing. But the distance between the first and second compositions is impressive in each case. In his second piece, David has made what might have been an undistinguished abstraction come to life. His use of details and metaphor from the ring of light around the number to the smoke choking the exhaust fan produce a real and interesting elevator. Greg has had similar success. The seedling of verve in the style of the first composition ("I mean blank!") comes to fruition in the second. The allusions to time at the beginning and the clock's face at the end provide a tight framework for what might have been a disjointed set of sentences. And he provides some insight into his own writing process.

Class sessions during the six-week period included various observation activities as well as work with figurative language. Interestingly, in their second compositions both boys demonstrate increased facility with syntactic patterns and heightened awareness of form, even though no special attention was given to those areas.

Observation is usefully linked to writing in three stages. In the first, the writer simply observes phenomena. In the second, he relates the phenomena to one another in meaningful ways, and the meaning *can* be the absurdity of the relationships. Because every observer necessarily has his own perspective, the meaningful relationships that observers conceive may be quite different. At any rate, as Gestalt psychology indicates, we do not perceive phenomena as isolated bits of experience, but in relationship to one another. We organize our perceptions by assigning meaning to the relationships. The third stage is the representation of these perceptions and their organization through some medium to an audience. The medium can be film, paint, sculpture, music, oral or written language, and so forth. The immediate concern here, of course, is with spoken and written language.

These three stages are roughly sequential in terms of both time and difficulty. However, sometimes the apprehension of the details of phenomena and the meaningful organization of the details will be simultaneous or nearly so. (A *biased* observer begins with an explanation and fits his observations into it.) On other occasions considerable time may elapse before a person perceives meaningful relationships. At times, a writer may discover the meaningful relationships as he writes.

For instructional purposes, however, it is useful to begin with observations followed by discussions, or simply private thought during which students organize their perceptions (attach meanings to

them) and render them into words. Writing about observations is likely to be most effective when it follows reasonable periods of looking, thinking, and talking. When students are engaged in recall of experience rather than direct observation, the first two stages are likely to be reversed. That is, the writer may recall the generalization (e.g., "I was scared.") readily. He may then have to recall the details which provoked his response ("In the front row of the audience one boy twisted his lips in disgust as he stared at me. Farther back, two girls whispered, looked at me for a moment, then giggled."). In the written product the generalization itself may precede or follow the details, or it may simply be implied.

Although observation is an important part of the composing process, it is only one part of that process. The suggestions which follow will emphasize observing and writing and will attend at least indirectly to certain other aspects of the process. For example, in the writing stage it is important for the observer-writer to decide which details and which organization of details are likely to have the desired effect on the audience. Although no suggestions deal with audience analysis, the activities allow for and encourage writing for peers within and outside of the class. Students in small groups of four or five should read and criticize each other's writing constructively. Additionally, classes can produce dittoed or mimeographed collections of their writing for distribution to audiences outside the immediate class. Such minimal attention to audience consideration in the composing process seems very important to increasing effectiveness. Another important aspect of the process involves the writer's purpose. He must decide what his purpose is and how best to achieve that purpose in view of his audience. In the case of observing-writing, he must ask what impression, feeling, or idea he wishes to convey and what details are most likely to convey it. Other aspects of the composing process, such as the writer's selection or invention of forms (including syntax and vocabulary), his environment, and the immediate writing situation, are not dealt with here. A well-balanced composition program will include these and a great deal more.

Teachers have long been aware of the importance of sensory perception in writing. Many secondary school texts call on students to make lists of words that "appeal to the senses," to label words in a passage that "appeal to the senses," and to describe objects, people, and places.[4] To encourage students to write perceptively, Edward B. Jenkinson and his colleagues advocate a process based on helping a student "learn how to ask questions about his topic so that he will discover what he knows and does not know about it."[5] The process involves asking students to write about some particular topic, for example, "a subjective description of his neighborhood,"[6] suggesting

many questions students might ask about their neighborhoods and asking them to suggest questions of their own. This is followed by "discussion on finding information and precise words"[7] and finally by writing in class.

A great many texts encourage observation and the use of specific detail through the presentation of models. Walker Gibson, for example, asks students to observe such things as a scene on campus or a conflict between the writer and his parents and presents selections by established authors which exemplify the type of "looking and seeing" to be completed by the student.[8]

Another common practice is to present students with a stimulus, a picture, a movie, music, or some object and ask them to write whatever comes to their minds. Lester S. Golub, however, states that a "problem must accompany each stimulus in order to generate creative thinking." He provides an example: "A teacher produced from a brown paper bag stimuli in the form of an old high-top boot, a carved wooden figure of an aging man, a 1920 alarm clock, and a stuffed frog, and suggested as the problem, 'What do these objects remind you of from past experience?'"[9] According to Golub, "more mature students can be presented problems such as audience appeal, argument, persuasion, approaches to logic, and paragraph development."[10] He also suggests that results are better when students discuss the problem.

The suggestions for activities which follow differ from such approaches. First, they are designed to involve students directly in observing. Second, their purpose is to increase the students' power as observers and recorders of sensory experience rather than simply to stimulate a particular piece of writing. Finally, they should effect a general heightening of sensory awareness, a desirable goal whether linked with writing or not.

They move from relatively simple problems in observing and composing to more difficult ones, from working with sensory impressions of inanimate objects and places to observing people, animals, and scenes. Although the teacher and students should talk about being clear and forceful, the emphasis in the earlier exercises should be on observing and recording concrete details. That in itself is difficult enough. Selecting and expressing details to make a particular but often complex impression comes later in the sequence. Some of the activities were first developed for use with college students, others for use with seventh graders. Most are useful with all grade levels, depending upon the sophistication of the students.

Practice

1. The Spy Game

When Kim, the hero of Rudyard Kipling's novel, enters the British espionage service, he is sent to work with a man who is expert in the arts of observation, disguise, and impersonation. Kim's first task is to learn to observe, identify, and recall in detail a vast number of objects in a short period of time. The following exercise derives from that incident in the novel. The purpose is simply to provide an interesting way to encourage students to attend to details. The only writing involved is a detailed list of the objects observed.

Almost any set of objects will do, but if they are said to come from a particular person and if they provide some intrigue as well as some clues to the character's personality, so much the better for the game. I have used the following set: three British coins, one Oriental coin, seven paper clips strung together, three matches split up the middle, a paper with a German street address, a card with dots in patterns of seven, four, and three, an old pocket knife, a chewed up pencil, three pipe cleaners twisted into circles, a pipe with dead ashes remaining in the bowl, a nail clipper, a key ring without keys, a short piece of recording tape, and a piece of exposed film. For this particular set of materials students (seventh through tenth grades) pretend they are undercover agents in an embassy in Paris. They learn that a spy has been captured. They will have one minute to observe the contents of the spy's pockets and to learn as much as possible from the contents.

To give all students an opportunity to study the materials closely, it is best to have two or three sets of nearly identical objects. Each set is placed on a desk or table in a separate part of the room and covered with a cloth. On a signal, students remove the cloths, study the materials for a minute (and kids really study them), replace the cloths, return to their seats, and write out a list of what they saw.

Next, after all students have had an opportunity to write down what they saw, they compare their lists. A discussion follows. What was the captured spy like? What might be significant clues about his business? What clues are there to his personality? What was he like? Students get into discussions of whether the split matches are a sign of nervousness or part of some code. Some astute girl or boy notes that a number of

things appear in patterns of threes and sevens. What the students decide about the spy, of course, is not important. The important thing is that they observe the details and try to draw inferences from them. Depending upon the enthusiasm with which students approach the discussion, the activity will take from 15 to 25 minutes. A teacher who has the energy to collect a second set of materials in duplicate or triplicate will find that most students respond eagerly to playing the game again.

On the other hand, students also respond enthusiastically to making up their own set of materials from some fictitious person's pocket or purse. They work in pairs to select a character, anyone from a small girl to a big time politician, write a brief paragraph about the personality of the character, and make a list of the objects which that person might carry with him. Since each pair of students will bring a set of objects to class, the materials will have to be things accessible to them. The following day, the class works in two or three groups of partners. Each pair of students plays the spy game with their group. Dividing the class into two or three groups of partners reduces the total amount of time required, gives every student a chance to be a leader in the game, and avoids the risk of boring students with too much of the same activity.

2. The Bag Game

In this activity students use their hands instead of their eyes to see. The problem is describing what "is seen" to others. The materials for each group include a large, strong paper bag taped around the top with masking tape so that the opening is just large enough to permit a student's hand and arm to enter and at least one fairly complex and uncommon object for each group. Objects such as pencils and silverware are too readily identifiable. Sea shells (univalves are best), carved or molded figurines of people and animals, small stuffed animals, odd-shaped jewelry, and unfamiliar tools (calipers, micrometers, and hand drills) work well. In each group the person "holding the bag" will describe the object in the bag to the other members of the group, each of whom attempts to draw the object. The describers cannot draw the object or point at the drawings of the others. In short, they must see with their hands and describe orally what they see as best they can. When the drawings are complete or when it appears they are as complete as they ever will be, the describers show their objects. The students should be encouraged to compare their drawings to the real object, discover where they went wrong, and try to come to an understanding of what aspects of the communication process were most difficult. When the groups have completed their discussions, the describers replace the objects in the bags and rotate the bags to another group. The procedure continues until each student has had an opportunity to describe some object to the group.

3. Blind Man's Buff

Like the preceding exercise, the purpose of this game is to involve students in tactile perceptions. While the last exercise tended to focus on forms, this one focuses on textures and related qualities. The equipment includes blindfolds for every student. In addition the game requires enough paper plates of such materials as the following for each group of four or five students: pieces of polyethylene, sandpaper, a square of carpeting, plywood, steelwool, a piece of lava, a nylon cloth, slices of onion, potato, cucumber, and so forth.

The class works in groups of three, four, or five students at most. After the students' blindfolds are in place, each group receives a tray of materials. Students first identify each item on the tray and, without removing their blindfolds, think of words which best express the feel of the material they find. After an appropriate time lapse, students remove their blindfolds and continue the discussion. When each group has found some interesting words describing the textures of the materials, the class comments on what problems they had in guessing the materials and in finding words to describe them.

An additional exercise with the same materials but a different purpose is somewhat more difficult but useful. Undoubtedly, students will have talked about the roughness of various objects which appeared on their plates. Each group concentrates on three or four rough objects (e.g., the sandpaper, sandstone, carpet, and steelwool) and writes down words and phrases which discriminate the roughness of each object. The groups then compare their lists of words and phrases.

4. The Shell Game Number 1

This game requires students to attend to salient features. Each group of three or four students receives a pair of seashells, similar in size, shape, and coloration, but not identical. Students study the two shells, comparing and contrasting them, and select one for description. With one student acting as recorder, the group writes a paragraph describing one of the two shells.

When paragraphs are complete, each group exchanges shells and compositions with another group. The inspecting group uses the paragraph to pick out the shell described and decides which parts of the composition made it easy to select the shell, which parts did not contribute, and which parts made the selecting confusing. Each group writes comments on these features before returning the paragraph to the original writers. Natural or unusual objects, such as seashells, which are not readily known by specific names are best in exercises of this kind because they demand more persistent examination.

5. The Shell Game Number 2

The preceding game is a fairly easy one. For various reasons, Shell Game Number 2 is more difficult. Each student writes a description of one seashell. (The shells for the class as a whole should have a variety of features in common.) When a student begins writing, he should know that some other student will have to use his composition to select the shell he has written about from among all the shells.

Each student picks one shell from a container and writes a careful description of the shell. When the students have finished, the teacher collects all the shells and all the compositions. The shells are spread on a table and compositions are redistributed so that no student gets his own or one from a student who has been sitting near him. Students then go to the table, identify the shells described in their papers, and return to their seats without moving the shells. When all students think they have identified the shells described, they return to the table to get them. The results are most interesting when two or three students clutch for the same shell.

When the composition readers have retrieved the correct shells, they write a few notes on the compositions that they have read, commenting on the details which were most helpful in locating the shell, the details that might have been confusing or misleading, and any aspects of the shells that might have been included to make identification easier. Students read aloud those compositions which they thought were particularly clear and helpful in identifying the shells.

Metaphor and simile are very likely to occur, for example, "This shell is a tiny tornado." It is useful for students to read aloud any comparisons, whether literal or metaphoric. Attention to such expressions will encourage their use.[11] Finally, each writer examines the comments of his reader.

6. Listening to Sounds

The purpose of this activity is to help students to create verbal images which convey nonverbal sounds. Not an easy task. The materials include a tape recording of a variety of sounds, such as the operating noises of a vending machine, water dripping onto a metallic surface, a coffeepot percolating, a clothes drier, the sound of a match striking and igniting, and so forth. The students listen to each sound, identify it, and write a description of it. The puzzle of identifying certain of the sounds will be intriguing, but the emphasis should be on thinking of words and phrases to describe the sound and inventing onomatopoetic words.

If tape recorders are available—many students, even in low-income areas, have their own tape recorders these days—volunteers can make recordings of different sets of sounds. After the recordings

have been completed, the class works in as many small groups as there have been volunteers, with each volunteer conducting a session. The listeners identify the sounds and attempt to describe them in writing.

An interesting composition assignment at this point involves students going to some place in school, in their own homes, or in the neighborhood to listen carefully to sounds. They then write a composition describing the physical aspects of the place briefly and conveying at least five sounds as specifically as possible along with the impressions the sounds made on them. Students suggest places nearby which they might visit.

7. Listening to Silence

In the preceding exercise students identify sounds and attempt to describe them. In this exercise they examine how sound or the comparative lack of sound influences their own feelings and moods. The dimensions of mood, of course, can be introduced simply by asking the question, "How does that sound make you feel?" In the following exercises this question will be a key one. The teacher begins the discussion by asking, "What do you hear when you listen to silence?" A good many students respond with "Nothing." Students try an experiment. They try to be absolutely silent for five to ten minutes while they record whatever sounds they hear, not simply naming the source of the sound (e.g., a truck passing) but describing the qualities of the sound (e.g., the wheeze of truck tires on a wet pavement, the gutteral coughing of a car without a muffler). They listen for sounds that are far off as well as for sounds that may be very close, the normal sounds of a quiet room (e.g., the shuffling of feet, the creaking of chairs, the sounds of breathing). When they have ten or twelve sounds, the students compare different expressions or descriptions for the same sounds.

In addition, students listen to the sounds of their own bodies, cupping their hands over their ears, plugging their ears with their fingers, placing the inside of their wrists against the ears. What do they hear in each case? What are some ways of describing each of those sounds? After running in place, students can listen for bodily sounds again.

If students imagine they are hiding from a dangerous pursuer in a deserted building, a dark city alley, a dense woods, or a ramshackle barn in the country, what sounds would they hear? How might those sounds affect them? The class can brainstorm, thinking of sounds and their effects in several kinds of hiding places.

When they have plenty of ideas, the students write compositions in which they imagine themselves running away, hiding in the dark, and hearing various sounds. Or they can imagine themselves in some other situation in which sounds affect their mood.

8. Sounds That Tell a Story

The following project can be conducted in several ways. An individual or a group of students can develop it as a special interest project, or the class may be divided into groups to develop projects. How it is done may depend upon the availability of tape recorders. The object is to make a sound story using only nonverbal sounds (screams, groans, laughs, and unintelligible whispers are permissible) recorded in sequence to convey the narrative.

First, the individual or group of students working together writes out a narrative line, indicating which sounds must be used at each point to develop the story: footsteps echoing in a hall, a lock being unlocked, a door being opened, footsteps receding into the distance, water being run into a sink, and so forth. Generally speaking, a long, involved plot is usually not possible. After the narrative has been written and the sounds indicated, students explore the problems of tape recording particular sounds and sound effects with the recorder they intend to use. For example, there will be an optimal position for holding the microphone to get the appropriate sounds of water rushing, of a lock being opened, of a door slamming shut, and so forth. In addition, certain sounds can be simulated: a blazing fire by crinkling cellophane close to the microphone; hoofbeats by a boy beating his clenched fists appropriately against his chest; gunshots by striking a hammer sharply against a heavy (but not hollow) piece of metal; the howling of wind by an automatic clothes drier.[12] When students have experimented sufficiently, they tape the sequence of sounds to convey the story they have written out. Each individual or group completing the project presents his sound story to the class. The presenter asks the class what they think the story is about. When the class has worked out the story line as best they can, the presenter tells what story was intended. Ordinarily, there will be a general similarity between the intended story and the story inferred by the class. But the use of sound alone prompts some fairly wild imagining.

9. What's That Smell I Hear? Synaesthesia

Physiologists tell us that our sense of taste (or taste buds) is limited to discriminating salt, sweet, sour, and bitter. The olfactory sense, on the other hand, is capable of discriminating over 10,000 scents. Despite the large number of scents which humans can discriminate, the English language has a paucity of words to describe smells. *Fruity, resinous, flowery, spicy, putrid,* and *burnt* describe major categories of smells.[13] These words and a few others, such as *rancid, acrid,* and *foetid,* nearly complete our vocabulary of smells in English. Most odors are named by whatever generates them: roses; Gary, Indiana; the Lincoln tunnel;

and so on. In "The Pit and the Pendulum" Edgar Allen Poe relies very little upon the sense of smell, even though his narrator can see virtually nothing. The two most important odors are described in terms of the substances giving rise to them: "The peculiar smell of decayed fungus" rising from the pit and "The vapor of heated iron! A suffocating odor" which comes from the heated walls of the dungeon. In short, the direct description of smells and odors will necessarily be limited to a few rather general adjectives and the naming of particular objects or substances which give off the odors and tastes.

The purpose of the following exercise, however, is to go beyond that limitation. For a beginning any encyclopedia will provide some interesting facts. The *Britannica* tells us the upper nasal cavity of a rabbit contains 100,000,000 receptor cells, each of which has six to twelve olfactory hairs. The total area of those cells with their olfactory hairs is about equal to the total skin area of the young rabbit.[14] To demonstrate the contribution of olfactory senses to flavor, the teacher has the students pinch their nostrils closed and taste a pinch of cinnamon—they should taste only a bit of sweetness. As soon as they release their nostrils they taste the cinnamon, rather, smell it. Or, again, if they taste a bite of raw potato and a bite of raw apple with the nostrils pinched tight, the two should taste the same.

The teacher and students prepare for the following exercise by collecting various odoriferous[15] materials. Consider spices, essences (vanilla, wintergreen, anise), flowers, herbs, vegetables, lubricants, damp soil, perfumes, powders, fertilizers, chemicals, and so forth. It is useful to deposit the substances in small numbered vials (easily obtainable from any drugstore) and to record the substance placed in each vial on a separate numbered sheet of paper.

The purpose of this exercise is to get students beyond simply naming the substance from which an odor comes. The first part of the exercise demonstrates the problem. The students ignite some sulphur in a spoon over a candle. How does the odor affect them? "It *smells awful.* It *stinks.*" Students think of other ways to describe the smell. Then they smell a strong perfume or something sweet and cloying. How is that odor best described? As students try to describe the two smells, the teacher writes the words on the board. The purpose here is to make clear the rather limited vocabulary of English available for describing smells.

Next the class works individually or in groups of four or five. The teacher distributes the vials which contain substances with various odors. Rather than saying that cinnamon smells like cinnamon, the students describe each odor in terms of other sensory perceptions (synaesthesia). Questions such as the following help extend imaginations: How does the smell feel—rasping, smooth, soft, abrasive, and

so on? What are its dimensions? How heavy is it? How thick or thin is it? What is its temperature? How does it move? Does it creep, surround, push, infiltrate? What color is it? What does it make you feel inside? After identifying one substance, students consider these questions and jot down words and phrases to describe the odor. Sometimes an example helps: "the rasping stink of ammonia."

After students have worked with four or five vials, they read one or two of their descriptions to the class. Those who have worked with the same substances compare their descriptions. The exercise continues until students have worked with as many as ten or twelve different substances. The more substances they work with the more likely they are to avoid clichés. A committee can collect three or four of the best phrases from each student for reproduction or display.

Finally, students visit some place of their own choosing—a basement, a kitchen, a filling station, a candy store, a bakery, a polluted creek bed, a factory, or any other place they know will have a number of odors—and write about their impressions of the place and the odors they find there. Conveying sensations to the reader is the key.

10. Observing Bodily Sensations

The preceding exercises have all been concerned with observations of the phenomena external to the body. Sometimes perception of external phenomena through the five senses so dominates our thinking that we forget about other modes of perception which are extremely important, namely, the perceptions available through internal organs and musculature. The ears provide a sense of balance. Because of the laws of inertia and gravity, we are aware of certain aspects of movements—the contraction and relaxation of muscles, the circulation of blood, the need for oxygen, and so forth.

The best way to observe some of these bodily sensations is to become involved in physical exertion, for example, hiking along a steep trail, running a mile on level ground, or digging a trench. Unfortunately, the ordinary English classroom does not permit such activity. Somewhat more sedate activities are possible. Short exercises in dynamic tension will reveal the effects of muscular contractions. For example, if students hook the fingers of the left hand into the fingers of the right hand and pull as hard as possible with both arms so that the hands remain at the center of the body, they will note various sensations after even twenty or thirty seconds. Or students can push against some immovable object. An ordinary classroom desk will do if the student remains seated and pushes down on the top or pulls up on the seat for twenty or thirty seconds. An interesting experiment is to stand in a doorway, arms to the side with palms toward the thighs. The arms are raised until the backs of the hands and wrists touch

the door jamb. The student pushes as hard as possible against the door jamb for about a minute. At the end of a minute he stands apart from the door, relaxed, arms to the side. The arms will involuntarily rise to shoulder height. A very strange sensation, something akin to weightlessness. A science buff may be able to explain why it happens. The obvious problem with the experiment is that ordinary classrooms have only one doorway. But if one student tries it in class, most others will try it somewhere else before the day is out. Another interesting exercise is the old standard punishment of some physical education classes, "picking cherries." Arms are held outstretched at shoulder height and the fingers are moved rapidly against the thumb, a motion which resembles picking cherries only indirectly. After even thirty seconds of rapid movement, students will find it becoming more and more difficult to move the fingers in opposition to the thumb.

As students perform these exercises, they attempt to observe changes in bodily sensations. After an exercise, students write brief descriptions of their sensations, examining feelings in many parts of the body. How does the head feel? Dizzy? Is there a pounding of blood? How do the eyes feel? The skin? The stomach? The heart? The lungs? After sharing their ideas, students try another exercise.

When students have become more fully alert to their bodily sensations, they try some comparisons in expressing them. For example, "My feet hurt" might become "The pavement had become a series of hammers smashing against my feet." "My face was hot" might become "My face seemed to be at the center of a furnace." Structural analysis of figurative language is not important at this point. The emphasis is on vigorous and interesting expression.

After some practice in describing the sensations of concrete bodily exercises, students imagine themselves in one of the following situations or in one of their own devising and write a composition about it, including some of the bodily sensations involved. They should include whatever details are necessary to make the situation clear to the reader or to add forcefully to the impression they wish to create.

1. Imagine your team is behind by one run. You have two men on base and two out. The pitcher is very fast. You pick up a bat and begin to move toward the plate.
2. Imagine you are alone when a gang of strange boys approaches and surrounds you. They stare at you in a threatening way.
3. Imagine you have been running for a long time, but someone is chasing you. It is necessary to increase your speed if you are to escape.
4. Imagine you are about to speak or perform before the student body

of your school. You wait backstage for what seems an interminable time.

5. Imagine you have almost decided to ask someone you like very much to go to a dance with you. You don't know whether or not the person will accept. You sit at the telephone.

11. Looking at Pictures

One reason for focusing on observation is to help students avoid dull and vacuous generalizations in their writing. However, as students learn to be specific and to support their generalizations, sometimes another problem arises. They bore their readers with a surfeit of detail. The problem is selecting the details which are most significant and which most readily convey the impression the writer desires. Working with passages drawn from student and professional writing and with pictures can help students learn to select details with care. If no appropriate student material is available, professional writing can be examined by all students as long as the teacher avoids presenting it in a threatening way. A number of literary passages will be readily available in texts which are normally in classroom use. Passages from books by naturalists, such as Niko Tinbergen's *Curious Naturalists* and Joy Adamson's *Born Free*, will provide examples of a different sort which illustrate similar selection principles. In examining and discussing the passages, students consider which details were included and why as well as which details might have been included but were not.

Each of the following exercises concentrates on selecting details which convey or support the impression which the pictures make upon the students. The best pictures for this purpose are likely to be those that have some degree of ambiguity; photographs from ads which have little or no ambiguity, for example, the shiny housewife smiling upon her equally shiny floor, leave little room for interpretation. At the other extreme, highly abstract paintings are offensive to many students and will detract from the work at hand. Pictures of pastoral scenes, mountain villages, city traffic, market places, old people, and war scenes which are capable of interpretation from more than one point of view are probably best. For example, a picture of a busy supermarket might evoke comments about the business-like hustle-bustle of shoppers from one student, the cleanliness and neatness of the store from another, and the general sterility and impersonality of such merchandising methods from another.

Several useful collections of pictures are available commercially, for example, *The Family of Man*, *The Writer's Eye*, and *Stop, Look, and Write*. However, the pictures in such collections are necessarily

small and make no use of color. High quality pictures are available inexpensively in back issues of photography magazines, *National Geographic*, *Holiday*, and occasionally in the news magazines. The best protection for pictures which the teacher might wish to use again is dry mounting on a fairly heavy tag board. Although most pictures will be used by individuals or by small groups of students, it is useful to have slides made of a few pictures for projection. Copies of pictures can readily be made by 35mm cameras with through-the-lens viewing features and interchangeable lens systems which will permit the use of one or two extension rings. Inexpensive extension rings permit close-up copying of flat surfaces without a special lens. Extension rings require an increase in the exposure factor, that is, greater light for taking pictures. However, the increases are constant and can be made simply by following the directions accompanying the extension rings. If the teacher feels ill at ease with a 35mm camera, he can probably find a student in the school photography club or another teacher who knows all about it.

The teacher begins by projecting a single picture and asking students to study it for a moment and decide on some quality or characteristic of the whole picture that most strikes them. Students record that quality or characteristic and then share their impressions. Next students jot down as many details as they can that seem to evoke the impression they had of the picture. Again, students share the details. Additional pictures can be projected and examined in the same way.

Students then work in groups of four or five, each group with a set of somewhat similar pictures, for example, city street scenes, railroad scenes, mountain villages, marketplaces. The pictures in each set should be similar but capable of evoking clearly different impressions—one picture might give the impression of gloom, another of poverty, another of brisk business-like people going about their affairs. The students in each group examine all the pictures, identifying at least one major impression and the details which evoke it for each picture. When the groups have finished with the first set, the pictures rotate so each group gets a new set to work with.

On another class day, the teacher lines the pictures up in a chalk tray and asks each student to select a picture he would like to write about. Each student writes a description of the scene, avoiding such phrases as "in this picture" or "this picture shows." The written description should make use of the details in the picture to convey the impression that the student feels it conveys. The procedures for this writing can be similar to those for Shell Game Number 2. When students have completed their descriptions, the teacher collects them along with the pictures and redistributes the compositions among the students. The reader selects the picture described from among all the other pictures, studies the picture and the composition, and writes

some comments about the writer's effectiveness, pointing out particularly strong use of detail and suggesting changes or additions that might be useful. The reader then returns the composition to the original writer.

In a variation of the above, each student projects himself into the scene and writes about it in the first person as though he were a part of it. The feelings and characteristics of the person who speaks in the composition can be his own or those of someone he imagines himself to be.

12. Observing Behavior: Pantomime

The purpose of this exercise is to increase student awareness of the details of human behavior through the use of pantomime in the hope that they will use appropriate detail in writing about the behavior of people. The first activities are relatively simple loosening up exercises. The second are somewhat more involved. Both include some writing.

Students sit in a large circle, and the teacher explains that they will be observing and trying to imagine the way people act. To begin, students concentrate on their hands. They make their hands appear evil, angry, helpless, greedy, and guilty. Next they concentrate on their feet, making them appear restless, embarrassed, impatient, and angry. It is useful to talk about how different motions suggest one or another of these characteristics. They concentrate on body posture. How would they sit if they were confident, afraid, tired, discouraged, cheerful?

Next, students decide upon some attitude or emotion they can convey by walking. Volunteers walk across or around the room in such a way that they display that attitude or emotion. After each volunteer finishes, the other students discuss what the characteristics of the walk were and what emotion or attitude they conveyed. The teacher encourages several students to volunteer. Finally, each student writes a few sentences describing the way a person walks so that the details imply the attitude or emotion of the walker. Sometimes an example is useful: "The old man walked slowly, his head bent forward, eyes staring vacantly at the sidewalk, his arms hanging limply at his sides, one foot dragging after the other with a scrape."

Next, to give everyone an opportunity to do a pantomime in front of an audience, the students work in groups of eight to ten. The teacher provides a set of eight to ten pantomime suggestions to each group. Each student draws one suggestion. The teacher encourages students to make up their own character-situations if they wish to. After students have had a chance to plan their pantomimes (some may wish a few moments to practice), a student leader takes charge

of each group, setting up chairs in one corner of the room, and so forth. As each student presents his pantomime, the remainder of the group should attempt to infer the age, attitude or emotions, and the situation of the character being pantomimed. Audience members discuss their responses to the pantomime, commenting on which actions best conveyed the character, which actions threw them off the track, and so forth.

The following are possible pantomime situations: (1) a middle-aged person, impatient and becoming more and more angry after waiting in a doctor's office for two hours; (2) a young person, nervous and somewhat embarrassed, sitting on a stage waiting to present a speech; (3) a young person, bored and trying to fend off sleep, sitting through a particularly dull class but trying to appear alert because he is already getting a bad grade; (4) an old person, irritated and a bit worried, sitting on a bus in the middle of a group of noisy teenagers; (5) a middle-aged person, guilty and depressed, waiting to see his boss who has discovered some of his illegal activities; (6) a very young child, guilty and frightened, waiting in a principal's office after throwing a rock through a school window.

After all pantomimes have been presented, students write a composition about a character and his actions in a particular situation. While students can use words such as *frightened* and *nervous,* the mental states of the characters should be implied in their physical behavior.

13. Listening to Dialogue: Role Playing

One way to approach writing dialogue is through role playing. As in pantomime, the student must pretend to be someone else. He must not only imagine that person's gestures, facial expressions, and language, but he must respond to what another imaginary character is saying—and somehow make it all convincing. These are precisely the requirements of good written dialogue. The purpose of the following role playing exercise is to prepare students for writing dialogue. The final product is a dialogue for two or more characters exhibiting the personal traits of the characters, the conflicts between them, and their feelings toward each other.

First, students choose a partner to work with. In some classes, of course, it is wiser if the teacher assigns students to work with one another. The purpose of the initial suggestion of ideas is to support students who cannot "think of what to do." Students should be encouraged to think of their own ideas. Those who cannot will be stuck without the suggestions.

An interesting way to begin this activity is with a prearranged conflict between a couple of students or between the teacher and a student. For example, a student might goad the teather until the teacher

loses his temper. Or two or three students might get themselves involved in a violent argument. At a point when the conflict seems to be getting out of hand, the prearrangement should be revealed to the rest of the class. The teacher then leads a discussion of the attitudes and emotions underlying the whole dialogue, directing attention to bodily movements, facial expressions, language, and so on.

The teacher then distributes "Character and Situation" sets such as those listed below. The students are instructed to read the sets and pair off in groups of two or three for role playing one of the given situations or one of their own invention. They are given time to work in their group developing the characters in the situation in greater detail, jotting down ideas, and planning the general outline of the dialogue.

After the presentation of each dialogue, the students discuss what the actions and language of the characters revealed about their feelings, their attitudes, and the conflict between them. The class compares their responses and impressions to what the actors intended.

The following are examples of role playing situations which might be suggested to students:

Set A *Characters:* two boys

1. A teenage boy lacks confidence and experience to be a member of a local team.
2. The second boy of the same age is captain of the team and has great self-confidence. His main objective is that his team should win.

Situation: The first boy wishes to be a member of the team but does not know how to ask. He approaches the second boy shyly.

Set B *Characters:* boy and girl

1. A shy boy secretly likes a girl very much but does not dare indicate his interest. He is awkward and unpopular among his classmates.
2. A popular, attractive girl who does not know the boy well. She is unaware of the boy's attitude toward her but is embarrassed to be with him.

Situation: They find themselves together as science laboratory partners. The boy attempts asking her to attend a party with him.

Set C *Characters:* teacher and student

1. The high school student dislikes the teacher intensely but is intelligent enough to keep from being openly nasty. He finds apparently innocent ways to irritate the teacher. He would like the teacher to lose control completely.
2. The high school teacher does not want to offend the students.

The teacher wants to be liked by them but has trouble handling this student.

Situation: The student has caught the teacher in an error and tries to exploit it to the teacher's disadvantage.

Set D *Characters:* mother and daughter

1. The daughter feels that she is old enough to do what she wants and resents her mother's attempts to control her activities. She thinks her mother is not always consistent in what she herself does, despite all the rules she sets up. This inconsistency angers the daughter even more.
2. The mother feels that her daughter intentionally attempts to defy her and that the daughter is both careless and thoughtless.

Situation: The daughter requests permission to go to a downtown movie at night with her friends. Initially, at least, the mother refuses.

Set E *Characters:* two girls

1. One girl ordinarily receives very high marks in school but tends to be somewhat conceited and somewhat suspicious of others and their motives.
2. The second girl is ordinarily cheerful and friendly and expects others to treat her in the same way. At the same time, she is very sensitive and easily hurt.

Situation: The two girls are stalling in the hall after school, both hoping to see the same boy. When a conversation begins between them, neither admits the reason for waiting.

After the presentation and discussion of the role playing situations, each student writes a dialogue for two or more characters exhibiting the personal traits of the characters, the conflicts between them, and their feelings toward each other. Again, the dialogue should imply rather than declare these things.

14. Field Trips

After the first three or four exercises, when students are accustomed to looking at things carefully, a field trip can be a most valuable experience. However, as almost any student knows, field trips are frequently a waste of time, a time to get out of other classes. The difference between a few hours out of school and a profitable field trip is preparation and follow-up. Since the concern here is observing and writing, almost any site has potential value for a trip: a zoo, an elementary school, a factory, a harbor, a local street, a park, a farm. Students suggest interesting places for observation and decide. They discuss the kinds of things they might observe at the destination. As

possibilities are suggested, each student takes notes. After a list of observational targets has been made, the students make some tentative commitments about what they plan to observe. Decisions in advance will help to avoid the "I-don't-know-what-to-look-at" problem. Once at the destination, they jot down words and phrases for reference. Upon return from the field trip, the students will find that these notes are a valuable aid in talking about what they observed.

After sharing their observations from the field trip, the students write about their observations specifically enough to convey their perceptions and their feelings to a reader. If the field trip is conducted early in the sequence or without adequate preparation, some students will write about it in very general terms: "We got on a bus. We drove along in the bus and got in a traffic jam. Finally we got to the zoo. There we saw many different animals including the giraffe, the elephant, . . ." To avoid such mish-mash, encourage students to focus on some particular aspect of the trip. As usual, students share their writings with the class.

15. Recalling Experience

In the preceding exercises, students observe something and then talk about it and write about it or both. A great deal of writing involves this close connection between observing and writing. On the other hand, writers frequently observe something but write about it only after a considerable lapse of time. In such cases the writer's problem is one of recalling the relevant details and recreating that experience for the reader. A sentence or two may represent a terrific condensation of events, emotions, and attitudes for the person who experienced the event. Unfortunately, a sentence or two may do very little in terms of recreating the event for a reader.

Before the students write this kind of composition, there should be a class discussion to suggest possibilities, talk about the details that would enable a reader to feel the same experience, and consider beginnings and endings for such narratives. It is sometimes useful to make a list of details connected with the incident.

Frequently, it would seem teachers expect this sort of assignment to result in a kind of true confession. If a student writes about an incident which led him to hate his father, the English teacher regards the composition as sincere and deep. But a composition about a first bicycle ride is somehow less significant. Needless to say, English teachers should eschew such vagaries of judgment. The important consideration is whether or not the writer used details effectively to convey the experience to his reader. The following recollection of experience is by a seventh grader who took part in various observing and writing activities.

Understanding
by Arne Kildegaard

"I'll pay for it!" I kept insisting as I was being towed to the principal's office by both ears.

"You'll pay for it with your hide!"

School had just let out when I was caught in front of the school "scratching profane language" on the hood of a decayed white convertible Cadillac with the edge of a penny. At the moment I was desperately trying to think of a way to avoid letting my parents know about it. It was a hot day, but the owner of the car was wearing a white fur around her neck. My stomach rose into my throat as I was seated in a large office chair. The elderly lady that was principal of the school sat and looked at me in utter amazement. I pretended to be very contented watching the walls as I avoided her staring eyes. My mother was called in, and she sat next to the principal, also staring with amazement. I began to get squeamish and my mother, seeing this, asked to talk to me alone.

"It's not so bad that you scratched the car, but did you have to write something that offends people? Couldn't you just have written your name?"

"Well I wasn't . . . I mean if. . . . I guess . . er . . well?

I was made to apologize to this black lady about twice my height. I shivered as I told her I was sorry; she looked back very coldly.

In the car on the way home my mother told me about how she had once entirely torn up her English book, and how she never knew quite why she had done so. I continued to look at my feet. At home I picked up the newspaper and opened it up so no one could see me. There I sat for two hours wondering why I'd done it. Dinner came and I sat and looked at my food. "Why?" I kept asking myself. I didn't eat that night, and the family was unusually quiet. After dinner I went up to my room, turned out the light and sat, wondering why. At 9:30, "click" the light went on and my father walked in. He pulled the covers up to my neck and said, "Arne, we still love you just as much as before . . ."

"Dad?"

"Just as much, Arne." . . . click

The activities above can have considerable impact on student writing. No one of them is likely to have much effect alone, but several used in the course of a year can result in more specific, more sophisticated, and more creative writing. In developing a writing program, teachers may wish to include these activities and to invent additional observational activities. A well-rounded writing curriculum will naturally include a good deal more. But the difference between a casual glance and a penetrating observation can be the difference between superficial and deeply meaningful writing.

Notes

[1] John Dixon, *Growth through English* (Reading, England: National Association for the Teaching of English, 1967).

[2] Ken Macrorie, *Uptaught* (New York: Hayden Book Company, 1970).

[3] M. D. Vernon, *The Psychology of Perception* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1962), pp. 36-38.

[4] For a sophisticated version of this approach, see Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, *Modern Rhetoric*, 3rd edition (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1970), pp. 279-286.

[5] Edward B. Jenkinson and Donald A. Seybold, *Writing as a Process of Discovery* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1970), p. 15.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Ibid., p. 26.

[8] Walker Gibson, *Seeing and Writing* (New York: Longmans, Green and Company, 1959).

[9] Lester S. Golub, "A Model for Teaching Composition," *Journal of Educational Research* 64 (November 1970): 117.

[10] Ibid.

[11] A number of these suggested activities can lead to extensive work with figurative language. See particularly the ninth activity, "What's that smell I hear?"

[12] For suggestions about sound effects, see Loren E. Taylor, *Radio Drama* (Minneapolis: Burgess Publishing Company, 1965).

[13] Carl Pfaffmann, "Smell and Taste," *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 1967, XX, 686.

[14] Ibid.

[15] The work on smells can be the basis for introducing a number of new words.

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